

## MIGRATION: A PROBLEM IN CONCEPTUALIZATION

*by Sylvia Helen Forman*

The issue of a lack of theory in the study of migration has been raised a number of times in recent years (for example: Elizaga, 1972; Goldscheider, 1971:48-75; Lee, 1970; Mangalam and Schwarzweller, 1968). Now that interest in migration studies on the part of anthropologists is increasing, this issue must be raised again. My response, in this paper, to the question of theory in migration studies is that the lack of theory results from conceptual and definitional problems with the topic and phenomena of "migration," and that some re-thinking of the concept should precede any further efforts at theory building. Moreover, rethinking the idea of migration may lead us in new directions entirely, rather than toward a grand theory of migration.

Efforts to create theoretical formulations about migration are usually traced back to E. G. Ravenstein, who in 1885 presented and published a paper on "The Laws of Migration." Ravenstein's "laws" are actually a set of descriptive generalizations, based entirely on census data of Great Britain, rather than explanatory propositions.<sup>1</sup> Still, as Lee (1970:289) points out, "few additional generalizations have been advanced" since Ravenstein's time, despite a multitude of empirical migration studies. Later efforts to develop migration theory have been relatively few in number.<sup>2</sup> These theoretical efforts result in either (1) descriptive models (and related descriptive generalizations) which are based on arbitrary or limited definitions of migration and/or which address themselves to some limited aspect or type of migration<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Bock and Iutaka, 1969; Haenszel, 1967; Hamilton, 1961; Kemper, 1971; Lee, 1970; Van Arsdol, Sabagh, and Butler, 1968), or (2) typologies, which are based on arbitrary criteria or on mixed and inconsistent criteria (e.g., Bogue, 1959; Davis, 1974; Goldscheider, 1971:58-72; Petersen, 1969:252-306). Indeed, Petersen goes so far as to assert that "the ultimate generalization in this case [migration] is a typology . . ." (1969:289). Neither typologies nor descriptive models constitute theory, and in the study of migration they have

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not even contributed to the formulation of theory.

Several demographers have tried to determine the reasons for the dearth of theory in migration studies. They cite a number of noteworthy problem areas, and point to most of the same sources of conceptual confusion that I want to raise in the context of anthropological studies of migration.

One source of conceptual murkiness derives from the nature of the phenomena claimed to fall within the domain of demography: birth, death, and movement in human populations. Birth and death have in common that they are unitary, discrete phenomena. They can be treated as "events" (rather than processes), encapsulated in time and space. This issue has been raised before:

The statistical unit (for example, the "migrant"), in contrast to what happens with other universes ("births," "deaths" . . .), is not susceptible to a univocal definition but to several, which are a function of "time" and of "distance" . . . (Elizaga, 1972:123)

Several general features of migration distinguish it from fertility and mortality. First and foremost, birth and death are biological processes that may be viewed as distinct, uniform, discrete events. . . . In sharp contrast, migration has neither a biological referent nor uniform processes. (Goldscheider 1971:48-49)

Goldscheider goes on to note that migration can further be distinguished because while it involves both "exiting from one population and entering another population," births and deaths involve only a single process of either entering or exiting from a single population, and because while births and deaths are common to all human individuals and societies, migration is not a universal feature of human existence (1971:49-50). He concludes his discussion of this conceptual aspect of migration studies by stating:

These general differences between migration and the other two demographic components have been noted in the literature in many contexts. *However, these differences rarely have been related systematically to special theoretical or methodological issues associated with migration analysis.* (Goldscheider 1971:50)

I have added italics to the quotation just above in order to emphasize that, indeed, demographic researchers have treated migration as though it were the same kind of discrete event as birth or death. Yet whatever migration may be, it is not a unitary, discrete event. We must recognize, if we are to make any conceptual sense out of migration studies, that migration is, if anything, a continuous phenomenon—an ongoing process—and further, that its continuous, processual nature is as true of people's decisions about their movement as of their physical mobility over time and space.

Other major sources of misconception or conceptual ambiguity in mi-

gration studies concern units of measurement (Elizaga, 1972:122) and "boundaries."

Is the appropriate unit of measurement the individual who moves, or the collectivity of movers (and if so, are they to be defined as "out-migrants" or as "in-migrants"?), or some other unit, such as the entire population (both movers and non-movers) of which the movers (either individually or collectively) have been a part at some point? Mangalam and Schwarzweller (1968:13) note that most of the better-known studies of migration take the individual mover as the unit of measurement. But they argue that this is a poor conceptualization—since "collectivity and interaction are the heart of the phenomenon"—and that the unit of measurement should be the collectivity of out-migrants from a given geographical location (Mangalam and Schwarzweller, 1968:13 and 1970:8). Yet even if we could accept this argument, it does not seem to respond fully to the need expressed by Elizaga when he insists that there is a

lack of a consistent and satisfactory system of operational definition for the measurement of the migratory phenomenon (for instance, in the sense that fertility is measured), including: unit of measurement, intervening variables, summary indices (rates, etc) . . . (1972:122)

Other arguments can be and are made, of course, defending some unit of measurement, either as standardized and universal or as particular to a specific empirical case. But the point remains that general theory in migration studies presupposes general acceptance and use of standard units of measurement, and such units have not been established.

"Boundaries" become a conceptual issue in two different ways: in connection with data sources and as arbitrary sets of lines, and in connection with the temporal aspects of movement. Demographers have recognized the problems associated with "boundaries," as in the instance of the differences between migration and birth and death, but have not related these problems directly to migration analysis. "When migration-defining boundaries are selected, there is little choice in most cases. The census or other statistics must necessarily follow civil boundaries of some kind" (Bogue, 1959:489). The implication in this statement is that the demographer must then necessarily follow the delineations prescribed for the census or other statistical data source. Goldscheider, after discussing some of the earlier arguments about boundaries, underscores the same point when he notes that "most demographers who restrict the definition of migration, therefore, do so on arbitrary grounds in terms of boundary crossings," where the boundary lines are most commonly those of administrative or political units (1971:62). The use of arbitrary geopolitical boundaries is evident in most definitions of migration, in most empirical studies of migration phenomena, and in most typologies of migration. For example, the usage is especially clear in the traditional typological

distinction between international (external) and intranational (internal) migration (see Goldscheider, 1971:64-67). All this adds up to an extreme case of data dictating conceptualization and mode of analysis. Unless a researcher is asking a question specifically about the action of boundary crossing, the use of arbitrary geopolitical boundaries, in the definition and investigation of migration, seems more likely to obscure or distort, than to clarify, our understanding of the phenomena we study.

Given the "continuous" (rather than discrete) nature of migration phenomena, boundaries are a source of conceptual difficulty in another way. Not only are boundaries established in an arbitrary manner, but they are used to count discrete events of migration. That is, the very use of such boundaries contributes to the tendency to view migration as a discrete unitary event, as a phenomenon which can be tallied up in the same manner as births and deaths. I would argue that such reduction of the study of migration to the counting of boundary crossings (even when the tally includes such additional elements as "who" crosses "which" boundaries, and "when" and "in what order" they do so) is very heavily to blame for both the general conceptual muddiness and the lack of theory about migration. Such boundary crossings may be of interest or utility to governments, but they seem to offer little of value to our attempt to understand human behavior and social processes. Rather, they cloud the matters of who is actually doing what.

Temporal boundaries are set by demographers with the same sort of arbitrariness as geopolitical ones. "Migration is usually defined as a move that involves a 'substantial' period of time or one that is 'permanent' or 'semi-permanent'" (Goldscheider 1971:63). Obviously the meanings of the terms in quotation marks must be established in an arbitrary manner; in practice, their meaning is not only arbitrary but usually idiosyncratic to the investigator in a particular study. Petersen explicitly admits this same point:

If we define migration as the permanent movement of persons or groups over a significant distance, some of the key terms of this definition ("permanent," "significant") are ambiguous and in practice have to be delimited by an arbitrary criterion. (1969:41)

Once again, the use of arbitrary boundaries leads to consideration of migration as an "event" rather than a process and places distorting limits on the phenomena we attempt to study.

From an anthropological point of view, the approaches to migration that simply tally up events of movement over arbitrarily delimited geographic and temporal boundaries are, at least potentially, productive of ambiguity and confusion. For example, if I move from a house on one

side of a county line to a house on the other side of that line, I have crossed a geopolitical boundary, and the U.S. census and many demographers would count my move as an act of (internal or residential) migration. But it is entirely likely that I have had no intent to "migrate" in making this move, that I have had no motive based on seeking new opportunities or utilities, no change in social status, no change in life-style. Alternatively, I might make a move—a change of residence—which does not involve crossing a geopolitical boundary but which does involve (by being a shift of neighborhood, or going to the "other side of the tracks") some significant change in my social or economic condition and which was intended, in my decision-making, as a "migration." Further, in either case, I could find reason to move again, after any interval of time. Under which of these conditions am I, or am I not, a "migrant?" Or a "successful" or "unsuccessful" migrant? Or a "residential" rather than a "labor" migrant? Apparently, in any case, an approach that notes migration as an act of crossing an arbitrary boundary, and remaining on the other side for an arbitrarily delimited period of time, precludes asking many anthropologically (or sociologically) interesting questions about some features of moving behavior, and possibly presents a deceptive picture of situations and of the processes of which they are a part.

Even migration studies that focus on such matters as the nature of a set of migrants (age, sex, education, etc.) or the decision-making of migrants depend on the prior delineation of arbitrary boundaries (in time and/or space). While such studies provide empirical data of value and interest to social scientists, their dependence on arbitrary definitions and boundaries flaws their capacity to produce generalizations or theory.

Most migration studies conducted by anthropologists are of this last type: that is, they focus on some sub-set of the migration phenomenon (e.g., in a peasant community, who does and does not move; how do migrants decide where to go; what is the process of adjustment of migrants to their new location), or they study migration as a subsidiary feature of some other research topic.<sup>4</sup> In the latter case, the definition of the central phenomenon of study provides a definition of migration and its temporal and spatial boundaries that is significant (non-arbitrary) within the context of the specific investigation. In the former case, the anthropologist accepts some prior delineation of arbitrary boundaries—usually those already established by demographers or by local administrative units. Hence, while such studies by anthropologists provide a wealth of empirical data, they too are unable to escape the limitations imposed by arbitrary boundaries—they remain tied to the local empirical situation—and unable to generate theory about migration.<sup>5</sup>

By this point, it should be clear that "the study of migration presents peculiar problems in terms of definition and complexity" (Kirk, 1960:307). Can we study what is called "migration" without reducing it to a discrete event model or without repeatedly being conceptually confounded by the problems and limitations discussed above? The demographers who have raised these same issues of limitations seem to think that, somehow, we can productively undertake such study. Elizaga (1972:126), Goldscheider (1971:72-75), Mangalam and Schwarzweller (1970), and others continue to call for more research, more analysis, and more effort to build theory. But I doubt we can escape these limitations, because they are conceptually built into the entire domain of inquiry about migration, into all the definitions of what this "migration" phenomenon, which we want to study, is.

If my assessment of the situation is valid, we have a choice of two alternatives. We can continue research in the present mode, and ignore the limitations inherent in such research. Or we can directly confront the question: What are we really trying to study? What are the phenomena, heretofore placed under the rubric "migration," that are of interest to anthropologists and other social scientists? In the remainder of this paper I want to begin a discussion of this question.

Some demographers have noted that migration has effects that are manifested in all the sub-systems of society, and also that migration is "caused" by events originating in economic, political, or social spheres.

Migration always involves changes in other sub-systems of society. Movement in space must either be determined by some changes, or result in changes, or be a concomitant of changes—the latter implying that migration may often be viewed as a link in the process of change, neither clearly as a determinant nor as a consequence. (Goldscheider, 1971:73)

Goldscheider raises an important point in this statement (although it comes at the end of his discussion of theoretical issues in migration research). Bogue (1959:486) suggests the same point when he says, "Migration frequently is a major symptom of basic social change." Yet both these authors, and many others writing the field of demography, make these statements with the emphasis fully on migration itself. And anthropologists interested in migration seem to have accepted the demographers' conceptual framework in this regard; that is, they have accepted definitions of migration that leave out or minimize the element of social-cultural change.<sup>6</sup>

Hawley, in discussing migration, has emphasized that

Change without movement is impossible. In organic life changeability is the measure of adaptive capacity, and mobility is the mechanism of change. . . . [Migration] is



both the means by which change is effected and the most accessible and measurable evidence of change. (1950:324 and 327)

This assertion, in conjunction with those cited above it,<sup>7</sup> should suggest to us that change, rather than migration, is the proper central focus of studies that mean to take human temporal-spatial movement as a dependent variable. Indeed, we might find it worthwhile, at this point, to develop a definition of migration that would avoid some of the problems of arbitrariness and ambiguity inherent in the traditional demographic definitions. For example, we could define migration as 'that geographic movement of human groups or individuals that involves non-recurrent changes in some aspect(s) of their pre-existing life-ways.' Such a definition would enable us to bypass the problems of "permanence" and "significant distance" and arbitrary geopolitical boundaries and the questions of whether involuntary moves (as in slave trade) or regular moves (as in pastoral nomadism) do or do not count as "migration." But even this sort of definition, it seems to me, still fails to provide us completely with bases for comparing and generalizing instances of migration or for developing a theory of migration. Therefore, I propose going beyond even this kind of definition, and dropping the issue of migration as a focal question altogether.

The point, it seems to me, is that while for diverse purposes anthropologists may wish to continue to employ "migration" as an independent variable in their studies, we do not want to focus on "migration" as a dependent variable. We want to be studying social-cultural change. Geographic movement is frequently associated, in one way or another, with social-cultural change—and when it is, it deserves our attention, but only as a related subsidiary phenomenon, a concomitant of change but not a phenomenon which can be, or should be, investigated and understood by itself.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, with this perspective, there will be no "theory of migration"; nor would there be any need for one.

Also obviously, this proposal, that we focus on social-cultural change rather than on those geographic movements which are often associated with change, confronts us with some new and serious conceptual problems (some of which relate to the problems of demographic migration studies). One of these problems might be stated as follows: in many of our (i.e., social science) paradigms, we seem to see the normal state of being as a "steady state." (See Bennet, 1975; Bennet, 1976; Hawley, 1950:319-322; and Holling, 1973, for some related discussions.) Hence, many of us see staying in one place as normal and moving (migrating) as non-normal, and also as a discrete event taking place between two conditions of social homeostasis. So, too, we seem to view people remaining in or maintaining a given set of social-cultural conditions as nor-

mal, and changing of economic activities, social roles, cognitive constructs, etc., as somehow not normal, and also as discrete events taking place between two conditions of social homeostasis. We see social-cultural change (as well as the sub-set of it known as "migration") as encapsulated in time and space, as event rather than on-going process.

As long as we can and do conceptualize change with a discrete event model in our minds, we can, among other things, come up with "migration" as a meaningful category of phenomena, amenable to investigation as such. We can also work ourselves into conceptual and analytic corners, from which generalization and theory are not likely products of our research.

A conceptualization of change which posits change as a constant process of life (both biological and socio-cultural life) places geographic movement in a non-arbitrary context. Such a conceptualization further makes evident the general limitations of models that reduce process to discrete events, and makes evident the general limitations of models that operate with homeostatic mechanisms.<sup>10</sup>

Another of the problems deriving from my proposal is that of measurement. Are there significant (non-arbitrary) and useful definitions for the measurement of phenomena of social-cultural change? What might the units, variables, and indices be that could be standardized or generalized for the study of change? It seems to me that these questions, rather than questions restricted to the migration sub-set of change, ought to demand our attention at present.

## NOTES

This article is a revised version of the paper I presented in the symposium "New Approaches to the Study of Migration," at the 74th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (San Francisco, December 1975). In making the revisions, I am grateful for the helpful comments of Professors Kenneth Dolbeare, Alfred Hudson, Brooke Thomas, Richard Wilkie, and David Yaukey, as well as the criticisms offered by the symposium participants and audience.

1. The following examples of Ravenstein's "laws" may help to illustrate my critique of them:

4. Each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current.
5. Migrants proceeding long distances generally go by preference to one of the great centres of commerce or industry.
6. The natives of towns are less migratory than those of the rural parts of the country.
7. Females are more migratory than males. (Ravenstein, 1885:199)

2. Indeed, as Mangalam and Schwarzweller (1968:15) point out, demographers generally have not tended to be theoretically oriented, and sociological theorists have not taken much interest in problems of population.



3. I am referring here to models that concern themselves with such matters as push/pull factors, patterns of rural to urban migration, rational decision-making in migration, success of migrants, etc.

4. For example, an anthropologist studying kinship in a village community might take note of the impact of in- or out-migration on marriage patterns. The migration phenomena, in this kind of case, are secondary to the central focus; and the boundaries by which migration is indicated are established as a function of definitions built into the formulation of the central topic.

5. Most of these anthropologists, of course, are not directly concerned with generating grand theory about migration.

6. A glance at the definitions of migration offered in some of the other papers in this volume, or in other anthropological empirical studies of migration, should suffice to substantiate my point.

7. I realize that one could offer some criticism of Hawley's assertion, but I am not undertaking to do so here.

8. I place the emphasis here on the geographic dimension of movement, since I assume it to be self-evident that change must have a temporal dimension.

9. There are, of course, individual social scientists who have not taken this view. And the "conflict theorists," viewing conflict, in a dialectic process, as generating social change, have taken change (rather than homeostasis) to be the reality of social life.

10. One could go so far as to suggest that homeostasis is always simply a function of investigation conducted within a short temporal perspective. In any case, the limitations of homeostatic models derive primarily from the fact that they emphasize negative feedback loops and largely ignore positive feedback loops.

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